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PRESS RELEASE

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Three Foreign Nationals Each Sentenced to 23 Months in Prison For Alien Smuggling and Visa Fraud Scheme

WASHINGTON – Three foreign nationals each were sentenced today to 23 months in prison for their roles in a conspiracy to smuggle aliens for profit and conspiracy to commit visa fraud in an extensive and sophisticated visa fraud scheme through which they fraudulently procured visas from the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia.

The sentences were announced by Assistant Attorney General Lanny A. Breuer of the Criminal Division; U.S. Attorney Ronald C. Machen Jr. of the District of Columbia; Eric J. Boswell, Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security and Director of the Office of Foreign Missions, U.S. State Department; and Director John Morton of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

U.S. District Judge Ellen S. Huvelle also ordered Heliber Toro Mejia, 52; Humberto Toro Mejia, 60; and Luz Elena Acuna Rios, 53; all of Bogotá, to serve three years of supervised release following their prison terms. Judge Huvelle also entered removal orders for the defendants.

The defendants pleaded guilty on September 29, 2010, to one count of conspiracy to commit alien smuggling for profit and one count of conspiracy to commit visa fraud. They were charged in a three-count indictment returned by a federal grand jury in the District of Columbia on February 4, 2009. The defendants were arrested on June 2, 2009, by Colombian authorities in Bogotá on provisional arrest warrants in response to a U.S. government request for their arrest and were subsequently extradited to the United States for prosecution.

According to court documents, Heliber Toro Mejia, Humberto Toro Mejia and Luz Elena Acuna Rios admitted that they operated an extensive and sophisticated visa fraud ring that profited by assisting otherwise inadmissible Colombian nationals in fraudulently procuring visas from the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá. According to plea documents, to support the visa applications

of alien applicants, the defendants and other conspirators created fictitious backgrounds for the aliens and fraudulent supporting documentation, including paperwork that appeared to be official Colombian government-issued documents such as tax filings and birth and marriage certificates, property ownership records, and corporation documents. According to plea documents, the conspirators coached the aliens on how to pass the visa interview at the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá by answering questions untruthfully as well as how to lie to U.S. immigration authorities about their backgrounds when entering the United States. The defendants admitted to assisting more than 100 aliens in fraudulently obtaining or attempting to fraudulently obtain a U.S. visa during the course of the conspiracy. According to plea documents, many of those aliens who did obtain a fraudulently-procured visa used that visa to enter the United States.

As part of their sentences, the defendants were ordered to forfeit assets related to the alien smuggling and visa fraud scheme, including an office in Bogotá and \$234,533 in proceeds. The defendants agreed to fully assist the governments of the United States and the Republic of Colombia in the identification and location of all directly forfeitable property and substitute assets and to pass clear title to directly forfeitable property and substitute assets to the United States. If requested by the U.S. government, the defendants also agreed to voluntarily forfeit to the government of Colombia any and all assets which are subject to forfeiture as the result of their criminal activities.

The charges were a result of “Operation Coffee Country,” a coordinated international investigation by the Diplomatic Security Service - Regional Security Office in Bogotá and ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Attaché’s Office in Bogotá. The Diplomatic Security Service - Criminal Investigations Division and the ICE HSI Special Agent in Charge in Washington, D.C. provided substantial assistance.

The government of Colombia, including the Colombian Department of Administrative Security and Colombian prosecutors, provided significant assistance and support during the investigation, arrest, and extradition of the defendants. The Criminal Division’s Office of International Affairs and the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá worked with their counterparts in Colombia to effect the extradition.

The case is being prosecuted by Senior Trial Attorney James S. Yoon of the Criminal Division’s Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Frederick W. Yette of the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Columbia. Significant assistance from the Criminal Division’s Office of International Affairs was provided by Trial Attorney Nicolette Romano. Senior Trial Attorney Jean Weld from the Criminal Division’s Asset Forfeiture and Money Laundering Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Diane Lucas also provided assistance, along with Paralegal Specialist Phaylyn Hunt, of the U.S. Attorney’s Office.